My first day of school had the promise of rain. Recently moved to Washington from Maine, my early mornings required a raincoat. My mother had dressed me to perfection: a white turtleneck with polar bears that were anything but white and bibbed overall jeans were hidden under a red checkered pullover rain jacket with a hood. The inside was itchy. School was important to my mother, and we were all going to look good. The early morning brought my mom’s friend Beth over to watch my youngest sister, while I headed for Kindergarten and Julia headed to pre-school. The picture of me on that day shows a face that is trying to hide to control the situation. My smile is calm, but I am anxious to go. The build-up and expectation has all been too much. New places are familiar after numerous homes in Washington, Maine, and Minnesota. My sandy blond hair and round face speak to how much has changed and transpired transforming me into the gaunt face with light brown hair and black eyebrows.

Hillcrest Academy was forty minutes away in the Fairhaven district of Bellingham, Washington. The school that my parents had originally wanted me to go to, which would later be my elementary and middle school from second until eighth grade, had maximum occupancy in my grade and couldn’t take me. I remember the long and early drive to get to Hillcrest. Misty mornings mixed with evergreens’ shadows, passing residences and Western Washington University, one of my mother’s alma maters, are almost as memorable as school. We played with a telephone in the car and sang around to cassette tapes and CD’s. Hillcrest: a 5 AM alarm clock and a long drive five days a week for one of the few things my parents could agree on: small, private, Christian-integrated education. Kidegarten at Hillcrest included sign-language.

A year later I was in Maine. Gone were my parents’ fantastic country home and all the luxuries I was still too young to acknowledge; now I was living with a single parent and two young sisters. The first day of Temple Academy in Waterville has a quieter look on my face than the year before. Nervous, dressed in a uniform: white polo and khaki shorts. Temple Academy was small, private, Christian-integrated education. I knew how to read, but I didn’t know how to tie my shoes.

A year later I was in Washington. My picture of the first day of school in second grade shows me laughing with my sisters. We were all finally in school. High-wasted shorts with a cream t-shirt tucked in with an elephant on it, I am holding a special lunch box I had picked out, fluorescent green with a violent picture of Hopper and Flick engaged in what looks like a verbal spat about to become something more physical. Ebenezer Christian School was small, private, Christian-integrated education.

My first three years of school could have been incredibly tumultuous for me and my sisters. I believe they were at times. We continue to grapple with the effects of my parents’ complex relationship to this day. The one thing we always had constant in our lives though was school, our small, private, Christian-integrated education. My parents were willing even if times of greatest financial difficulty to pay for the tuition for this education. While much of Hillcrest and Temple Academy memories were lost in moving, my parents were always invested in school. My mom substituted. She invited my teachers over for dinner. My dad was a coach, recess volunteer; he helped with hot lunch. They came to everything and dragged any family member they could find. My dad would make us carol to all our teachers every year until seventh grade.

I was always a reader and an artist. My elementary years didn’t offer much beyond what a school of 180 or so could, but being in the largest class in Ebenezer history (24 students), we had a teacher’s aide until middle school. With such small class sizes, education was independently driven. Teachers were invested in your life and the community between students of other grades was very important. We would play whole school soccer games at recess or the ever popular dead rabbit in gym. As students you were expected to be model academics and Christians at all times.

The subtleties of elementary school are lost on me. I was always a teacher’s pet and fairly successful and therefore able to glide on by, performing and meeting standards without any worry. Mrs. DeRuyter told my dad in his first parent teacher conference that “God made spelling to keep Johnny humble.” Students whose academics faltered lost privileges or did remedial time. Different teachers seemed to hi-light different things. Second grade felt like a lot of science and math. Third grade was a lot of social studies and math. Fourth was a lot of reading. Spanish, art, music, and PE were the only classes you broke away from your single classroom with your classmates. Fitting 24 desks into rooms was always a work of creativity at Ebenezer especially considering that the classes averaged anywhere between nine and fifteen desks. Teacher’s different styles and interests depicted what made it on the walls.

My sisters and I were outliers having the only single parent in the school. This was compounded by the fact that our mother that was thousands of miles away. The only children of divorced parents, our teachers became especially invested in us. That being said, they had special expectations for us. We were enthusiastic, bright and engaged but always with a chip on our shoulder. Unruly at times I was duct-taped quiet, forced to clean restrooms, and other creative punishments. Some recesses I would help the first grade teacher grade papers. As I got into middle school’s portables, I was busier solving my classmates’ relationship drama.

Ebenezer had been small and relatively excluded hiding near the United States-Canadian border in farm land. Beyond the families that had gone there for years, it brought a whole new meaning to private education. We were independent. Teachers were so close to students and learning standards were so flexible, units and special projects could be developed on the spot. Fish units, independent reading, out-of-class excursions were always ready with a little imaginative salesmanship and creative coaxing of teachers, parents, and colleagues alike. That all changed when I began attending Lynden Christian High School in Lynden, Washington. I now went to school in town. Lynden is a city with 12,000 people, but felt like a town in comparison to Bellingham’s 86,000. The private high school was as much part of the town as the public school. Some business favored one or the other, but overall the city had room in its crown for two jewels.

I don’t have a picture for my first day of high school because I wasn’t there. I was caught in a tropical storm and stranded in an airport. My hair was long. I was tanned from a summer in Maine. High school was still small, private, with Christian-integrated education. Now, the privacy that had given the teachers at Ebenezer flexibility to explore student interest through impromptu units and activities was lost in structure of seven classes daily and chapels on Tuesdays and Thursdays at Lynden Christian.

Lynden Christian maintained the semblance of a normal high school with additional classes directed toward understanding religion and specifically Christian ethics, and of course chapel. With traditions of leading music and theater programs, history with sports’ state titles, and award-winning teachers and academic programs Lynden Christian was a package deal offering what people expected to pay for with private education. The Christian title was prevalent extending into the community fabric. Students who were not religious would have felt uncomfortable, although the school tried to deny it.

Where Ebenezer worked to provide affordability for families, Lynden Christian was thousands more nearing ten thousand dollars with families whose wealth was notorious. Our parking lot littered with new models of cars that cost more than some of the students’ parents’ yearly salaries. Our sports teams and fans had to respond to “daddy’s wallet” chants on more than one occasion. While you inherited that stigma, there was a wider range of socio-economic status’s than the parking lot would imply. Churches, grandparents, and tuition assistance were provided. We were mostly the children of farmers with dirt on our hands and money in our pockets. Beyond the religious affiliation, people would send their students from extensive distances to play, sing, and learn. It also became a haven for those especially naughty children that were kicked out of public schools.

Needless to say, the community had expectations for Lynden Christian. The students were watched by fourth and fifth even seven generations of family members whose graduating pictures hung on the walls. Families were involved in performances, fundraising, LC society clubs, a thrift shop and cardboard and paper recycling business enterprises. Like the puritan traditions, we as students and an institution were the “city on the hill.” Any discipline was best kept on a tight leash by the very active school board. The students whose misfortunes became public were all the more scandalous. During my whole time at Lynden Christian, only one student failed to graduate. The others were quietly chased out early enough.

Classes were tracked. The school provided few remedial classes. They did not begin accepting students with special needs until my final year. The school also featured a very large population of (at least one eighth of the total school) foreign exchange students mostly from Korea or China. Teachers taught to the top of the class. Teachers came in with all different backgrounds and styles: lectures, activity-based, independently driven, even service learning. Two teachers were completing a National Board Certification during my time there which involved intensive reflective practice. Differentiated instruction was the norm particularly in Spanish classes. There was a wide range in experience of the teachers from first-years to teachers completing forty or more years. Being tracked in higher academic courses, school involved a lot of reading across disciplines and projects. There was less a focus on writing. Renovations stressed the importance of science and technology improvements the school was trying to reach.

As a successful student, my needs were largely met in the majority of my classes. As freshmen, I knew what my schedule was going to look like when I was a senior and who I would be taking courses with. For all the predictability three teachers stand out as models of exemplary learning.

Deb Matiko was an algebra teacher who was heavy on graded summative work which was irritating. She set up morning study sessions because she challenged students so much. She was single and not afraid to be mean. Her fiercely tough grading brought down many grade point averages, but she taught students what it meant to master concepts without mastering the grade. With international experience, she had concreted a style as tough her missionary zeal. I admired the challenges she set forth and the expectations she had for students. Unpopular overall, I was unwavering in what I say as the benefits of her style. I eventually had her for advanced algebra two, pre-calculus, and finance.

Ruth Posthuma was my speech and honors American literature teacher. She believed in extra credit. She rewarded those students who worked above and beyond. She valued students’ independent drive and fostered their skills. She was the teacher that really helped me find my skills as a student of English. She was not afraid to hand out challenging texts. She had a heart for the top of the class and the very bottom. Her sensitivity and “grading days” were routinely ridiculed, but she was the only teacher I let call me John.

Carol Hagedorn was a pragmatist through and through. Not in love with teaching or her students, she created a classroom that was designed for all learners. She was a performer by heart to the point that she even had us laughing in Spanish. She could not abide laziness or public displays of affection earning her poor ratings, but she made learning fun and effective balancing styles, fun, and assessment. She was a teacher who believes in personal relationships with students. She was not afraid to be personal and transparent.

With seven classes a day from such a wide variety, it felt like we hardly had enough time to learn too much. I never had enough except on long period Wednesdays and Thursdays which had hour and a half periods. Seven were too many classes for me to effectively dedicate myself to all of them, although I weighed myself down with extra-curricular activities.

As an honors and advance placement student who was very involved, I had a lot of success with school. I was driven, motivated, and enjoyed by my teachers. I worked for relationships with them, and benefited by it. It provided a quality education that I took advantage of. My success will be part of my greatest success and downfall as a teacher. I have had privileges and an incredible amount of agency from the support of friends, family, and school. This puts me in conflict with a majority of students. I have rarely tasted failure, but I also come with the belief that self-efficacy can be learned and that developmental appropriateness is the foundation of effective instruction.

I never saw myself or my school privileged. I saw myself as hard working and studious. I earned my grades in class, my parts in theater, my solos in chorus, and earned my money to go on all my school trips. Lynden Christian was always in contrast with Nokomis Regional High. My mom’s school was larger. I remember when she was teaching students in summer school. I thought summer school only existed in 90’s high school TV series. I did not know poverty. I didn’t know juniors and seniors who didn’t have their licenses or parents without jobs, let alone kids without food. Not knowing poverty in school changes the way students can learn. The more I can understand to make reading and writing and school relevant, safe, and comfortable for all students rather than just instilling education standards will need to be something I develop and work towards.

School was always a place of consistency and success for me. I enjoyed the whole package of school: the competiveness of academics, stimulation of socializing, and participation in community. I embraced the culture of the place and became part of the system. I also was an agent of changing ready to offer a new perspective be a voice of independence. This originality, spontaneity, and enthusiasm for school were welcomed by teachers, faculty, and staff alike. Other than a few distractions along the way only because of my studious diversions, I have always wanted to be a teacher. It was a family tradition, but more importantly it was an environment that I was thrilled to be part of and wanted to help others to be thrilled as well. The more and more I discovered myself in school the more and more I discovered myself as a budding scholar and future educator.

Originally, I wanted to teach art. As years progressed, my skills as an artist were too frustrating against my perfectionist standards. Art was becoming less and less of talent and hobby though as I became a more well-rounded student. I enjoyed all my classes. Even the subjects I struggled with, the benefits were implicitly present while my enthusiasm for school was explicitly apparent. Honestly, I would not mind giving myself to any subject. Science, math, social studies, language arts, world languages are all fields that learning can abound in so many ways.

I am a fan of learning. Language art was where I learned the most though. I learned about myself through exploring literature’s characters’ reactions, relationships, and experiences. Developing my writing and rhetoric proved to be an exercise in finding my voice as an individual. It stimulated my needs to understand my colleagues through their reactions to reading, language, and books. Reading and writing fed my voracious appetite to learn.

I always valued communication. Language Arts was a new art for me like drawing or painting, but something I could use all the complexity of different skills and higher-order thinking thrilled me.

My fascination with individuals is why I want to be a Language Arts teacher. I want to learn about individuals all the time. I want to understand the human condition. I want empathize with experiences and emotions that are foreign. I want to learn about myself and help my students learn about themselves through reading and writing. Exemplary teaching is reflective and empowering. My students will be able to learn about anything and everything. I want them to find experiences. I want them to know literature and writing as just that, as an internal reflection of the self and their world.

As a member of a community, I often take on leadership positions. Willing to go above and beyond for my beliefs and others, I see teaching Language Arts as a springboard to contributions to helping my students to develop greater agency and empathy for those who do not have it. As a member of the Student Education Association of Maine and the National Education Association Student Program, I also see myself as a future member who not only focuses on the protecting the rights of students but the rights of my fellow educators. Education is social justice. Community collaboration is essential. Whatever responsibilities, positions, and opportunities come along as my career in education advances, I will meet them with same dedication and sincerity I always have.

With the responsibility so heavy fears, concerns, and questions are always present to weaken resolve. The challenges and complexity of education, while daunting, are exciting. I am ready to develop and adapt as a professional. I worry that I learned to say no too late in life. I worry that I will take too much work home with me. I worry that I will be so involved that I will put myself to unhealthy lows. I am concerned that my energy for school will die off or will not be matched. I question how long I will be able to teach. I am not sure where I intend to teach yet and am curious where that will bring me. I can only prepare myself so much.